Twelve Steps from the Blues

by Ivor S. Irwin

Michael Parker, *Hello Down There.* New York: Scribner's, 1993, 273 pp. $20.

Tim Sandlin, *Sorrow Floats.* New York: Henry Holt, 1992, 352 pp. $21.95.

Luke Whisnant, *Watching TV with the Red Chinese.* Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1992, 310 pp. $17.95.

In case you haven't noticed, which is close to impossible, there's an agitprop of addiction going on out there. In fact, there's an epidemic of puerile hucksterism coming out of the arts in general. The counter reaction to the bacchanal of the late 1960s, '70s, and early '80s may yet go on for longer than the actual party. After years of having been collectively spoon-fed picaresque tales of what we selfish Americans did to *almost* self-medicate ourselves into a kind of shared de-evolutionary holocaust, the evidence is in. Imagine: tens of millions of baby boomers, products of a permissive society, embarrassed because they didn't even need to be offered bars of soap.

Somewhere in between the Beats, featuring Kerouac before he drank himself into the grave, and Nancy Reagan in a cute little red Bill Blass number doing her "Just say Nyet" thing, there are *stories* to tell. Right? I mean Americans don't say *Je ne regret riens;* instead, regret is all, and they weep buckets of tears and promptly turn the tears into "art."

This "movement" got started in the strangest way, however. Celebrities, of course, have the best hand-wringing and permission-giving acts. My personal favorite was Linda "I-did-so-much-coke-that-I-had-to-have-my-nose-cauterized-three-times" Ronstadt (I'm paraphrasing) in *Rolling Stone* and on various talk shows. Endless opportunities present themselves: the graphic how-to; the perverse, changing relationship between doctor and patient as admonitions on both sides are given and ignored in a suitably cloth-eared manner; the changing expression on Linda's face as, by that fateful epiphanic third time, the process no longer holds any mystery at all. If I'm waxing soporific to you here, perhaps it's because you're so sick of seeing and hearing the same jaded lore from middle-aged rock stars, writers, and actors about lost weekends, empty glasses, and dead friends that a more down-to-earth hero such as Wade Boggs can offer perhaps what should have been the last chapter. Sure, there were booze and drugs outside the confines of Fenway Park, but Wade, with the sweetest swing in the most poetic sport, gave us a new bugaboo: sexual addiction. When the consummate blue-collar, meat-and-potatoes third baseman of the Boston Red Sox checks into a 12-step program for group help in keeping that sporty phallus in his pants and exclusively for the use of his wife, you know that society is changing.

Lest you misunderstand my amazement at the Boggs case as a sort of elitist sneer, I beg to differ. There are self-help groups for seemingly every kind of addiction now available for people of *all classes.* This *seems* to be a good thing. A bit of group rhetoric and discussion never hurt anyone. In fact, this addiction to discussing addiction may well turn out to be the clarion call of the '90s. We have no Vietnam, no Hitler, no Depression, no true era of romance to rail against or praise. Save perhaps for AIDS and the disintegrating veneer of racial harmony in the United States, the question is: *What else would our young writers write about?*

These three novels exemplify this agitprop of addiction. Their authors each hold a mirror to the mouth of self-pitying, bedridden, baby-boomer types and locate the steam of life. They explore drug, alcohol, and television addictions, using each addictive substance to comment on contemporary culture and values. Yet, because the time frame of these novels is spaced between the '50s and early '80s, the *contemporary* humanitarian ideals conveyed often fall flat. Are they period pieces – or should a reader somehow understand *something* beyond the overriding simplicity of this: Better days, these writers say, *used to be.*

Ultimately, strategy overcomes story in all three of these novels. There's little or no subtext at work here. I am reminded of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller,* the hippiest of hippie westerns, an entertaining redundancy at best. The message purveyed – "Don't be an addict. Don't be a deviant" – becomes simply an erudite placebo for the cruder propaganda exemplified so perfectly by Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No!" campaign.

Michael Parker's *Hello Down There* is certainly the most ambitious of the three novels. Parker's prose sings, often, and I envy his dexterity. At his best, when eccentric humor meets Southern Gothic tradition, Parker mines a lively groove somewhere between Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* and Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The plot concerns a sort of Holy Grail quest as a cultured, small town aristocrat, Edwin Keane, a dope addict who nevertheless feels that he is "the only one not sleepwalking" (1), is awakened from a year-long morphine-induced stupor by the purity and beauty of one Eureka Speight. Seventeen-year-old Eureka, a

PHOTO BY BARBARA L. DOTY

Michael Parker

dreamy innocent recently uprooted from her farm roots as a consequence of her father's alcoholic ineptitude, falls totally for Edwin and his manners. She and Edwin – accompanied by Roy Green, a balding, misanthropic Yankee pharmacist, and Deems, a sot flunky hired by Edwin's doting, cloying mother to drive him around and report back to her his actions – embark on a journey in search of a cure to the nation's only narcotic detoxification center, in Lexington, Kentucky.

Behind the interplay of these characters lies the strongest presence of them all – the alcohol-soaked small town of Trent, North Carolina. Trent, full of canopied paths, cool rivers, azaleas, cornfields, and woods to dream in, initially seems idyllic. Yet the dreams the inhabitants share are all of escape. "I don't have to be here . . . but here I am" (6), Edwin says near the beginning, already resigned to the inevitable. Similarly, Eureka keens to herself:

> [H]ow will *you* leave? She thought about where she'd go first: Probably another Trent. Her future husband's Trent, identical almost to this Trent she sat in the middle of but not her own. . . . She wished for a man like Randall [her brother] but expected someone like her father: a gruff, tight-lipped man who would storm home grungy, whiskery and disagreeable one night and the next take her out for fish. From the first he would be tightly wound and short-fused, but he would be in love with her in his limited way, in awe of her flashes of independence. (39)

It is no wonder that she falls in love with Edwin, having aimed so low. Yet beyond all the old clichés of small town suffocation is something far darker and more horrifying. The fantasy of escape may be mutual but, save for Eureka and her equally somnambulant brother Randall, it is infested by a kind of booze- and pill-fired defeatism. The clearest observer of this status quo is the so-called "dreamy Eureka."

> This dark warehouse, here in the middle of this town she detested, comforted her. She was always discovering things to love locked inextricably inside something she could only tolerate. Pure moments buried within tainted hours, buffered by endless bad days. (35)

This aura of intoxicated horror seems inescapable for Eureka. To get away from drunken relatives – "The way the men were spaced in the mouth of the garage reminded Eureka of bad teeth" – she runs to the woods "where secret sins were . . . routinely committed" and "winos came . . . to strain rubbing alcohol through molded heels of bread salvaged from the trashcan" (139). Parker's use of sensuous detail conveys the kind of addictive mayhem that destroys all childhood dreams and sets young minds on the road toward an inevitable dependence of their own. His sense of place is powerful and commanding, although it's difficult sometimes to believe such clarity so well organized in the mind of such an awkward child-woman as Eureka.

Yet, the world outside Trent is even more dangerous. Boundaries and perimeters are unknown, so that while poor little rich boy Edwin goes through the heebie-jeebies of detox in the Lexington hospital, Eureka is trapped nearby in an inner-city apartment with Roy and Deems for the five weeks it takes for the cure. The sexual tension rises as Roy, formerly willing to lose his job for the sake of confronting and conquering Edwin's devilish habit, follows in the footsteps of the vulgar Deems and falls head over heels in love with the girl he is supposed to be chaperoning. Lexington is seen through Eureka's misty eyes as little but a gathering of factories, brick walls, and bars, suffering in comparison to Trent, where there is at least the beauty of nature to accompany the world's need to eradicate its collective liver.

After returning to Trent with a cleaned-up Edwin, Eureka, exiled from her family, moves into his house. A love-crazed, Iago-jealous Roy Green plots with Eureka's father to re-addict Edwin to morphine and ultimately succeeds. But what happens from that point on, as Gothic plot platitudes careen into one another, nearly ruins the novel. The wicked town engineers a

new fall from grace for Edwin, as, at the end, Eureka, her innocence evaporated, shoots her lover up with a hypodermic full of dope. The grand opportunity for redemption is missed and a small town's legacy of tragedy continues into perpetuity.

The real trouble here lies, ultimately, with the unrealized character of the noble junkie, Edwin. His drug addiction is due, we find out when the grand secret is revealed at the end, both to the (naturally) drunken death of his original true love in a car accident and to the smothering, embarrassing, all-encompassing, thick-as-molasses (naturally, it's the South) love of his mother. As a stark contrast to Eureka, Edwin can't help but come off as a miserable husk of humanity, which surely would be the point if we'd have been given a real reason for his fall. Like those blithe mental acrobatics that Parker attributes to Eureka Speight, we are also unreasonably asked to believe that the action takes place in 1952. Ike's name may be brought up now and again, but it's still hard to believe that she's such a sweet and easy lay, willing, without cajoling, to move into Edwin's house and become his mistress without any kind of crisis of faith or consideration of small town scandal. Likewise, the euphemisms of a post-modern world – "supportive environment" and "hyperventilating" – clash with that which works far better, Parker's gift for deep, concise lyricism.

While *Hello Down There* ends in unredemptive tragedy, *Sorrow Floats* is an extremely funny book throughout. Somewhere in between the sardonicism of Twain and the drugged-out meliorism of Tom Robbins, Tim Sandlin has a true gift, and he lets the frolic fly without ever losing the thread of a strong ethos. There's a boyish zeal for the scatological here, too; and it's a

Tim Sandlin with Moby Dick

measure of just how well Sandlin controls the voices and destinies of his characters that his foul-mouthed narrator, Maurey Pierce-Talbot, a jaded 22-year-old woman with a suicidal bent for Yukon Jack, comes off so convincingly.

As in *Hello Down There*, Sandlin frames his novel within the confines of another search for an elusive Holy Grail of redemption. Maurey's life hits bottom when she is thrown out of her small town Wyoming home by her husband, after a drunken binge during which she has driven on the highway with her baby son on the roof of her station wagon. Redemption, however, presents itself with the arrival of Shane and Lloyd, two recovering alcoholics who need an extra driver to help them move a load of illegal Coors beer to North Carolina in a converted ambulance:

> Shaped like a loaf of Wonder bread, it had stretched windows along the sides, what appeared to be an extra layer of sheet cake on top, and airplane running lights at the eight corners of the loaf. . . . Below that was another hand-lettered sign – MOBY DICK. (65)

Thus our intrepid crew, dogged by the daily breaking news of the Watergate hearings, heads southeast, not only to drop off the beer, but also to visit Maurey's daughter, Nicole (born when Maurey was 13), and an old lover, Sam, in Greensboro, North Carolina. Adventure follows adventure, and as each little crisis gives Maurey permission to drown in Yukon Jack, her two road buddies – who attend AA meetings in every town they pass through – mock, needle, and vilify her for drinking her life away. The trip is like one mobile, hijinx-filled AA meeting in which Maurey goes through all the appropriate stages: denial, passing the blame, eating humble pie, acknowledgment, stating the wish to abstain, and, ultimately, backsliding.

If all this sounds like "On the Road with John Knox," *it is*. Only here, Johnny Knox is a cowboy comedian. This is best exemplified by Sandlin's use of two preachy, running gags throughout the novel. Shane, a wheelchair-bound paraplegic, tells a series of lively but different tales to explain away his predicament. First, there's the hilarious story of his years as a Hollywood stuntman, where he breaks his back falling off his horse after an intense bout of saddle-bound copulation with, of all people, Katherine Hepburn. Then there's the tale of being beaten into crippledom by the clubs of vicious Alabama Klansmen after he tries to rescue a black friend in trouble. "That is so admirable. I'd love to give my body for a cause" (81), a friend of Maurey's notes. (Innocence is always etched in acid in Sandlin's world.) Shane's story keeps changing. In other versions, he was crippled by the jackknifing of a truck, felled by a falling tree during a forest fire, gored in the spine by Tornado the legendary Brahma bull, and then he's the victim of a motorcycle accident. It's all very rapid-fire and

laugh-out-loud funny, a clever counterpoint to Maurey's sending a postcard to her deceased father at each stop along the way. One reads:

> Dear Dad,
> . . . Proportion in Texas is shot to hell. The state is like Wyoming, only flat and the sky and earth are the wrong color. Makes for disorientation.
> I am living an ugly cartoon. Wish you weren't dead,
> Maurey (137)

Lloyd, too, the crustiest of Marlboro Man/Lee Marvin types, tells the ultimate lost weekend tales. He is the aging American maverick writ large, and he wears Maurey down. He is, she says, "like the Tar Baby in the Uncle Remus stories who sat there taking each punch until his attacker was absorbed and beaten" (195).

Sandlin's novel goes head-to-head with the horrors of alcoholism and, without being overly preachy, succeeds. The moral status of compulsion is difficult to define for a writer. The onus of being bad is thrown off when the same phenomenon is delivered up by an army of psychiatrists, guidance counselors, physicians, and treatment practitioners as a "disease." The ironist has always been a moralist, but there's almost a sociological subtext to Sandlin's writing. The notion of an obsessive craving for alcohol linked by a physical allergy to the drug itself is the bastion of the tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous. It has been regurgitated too many times in the media already. Such preaching would fall on deaf ears save for the presence of the wonderfully idiosyncratic, AA-addicted Shane and Lloyd and their brave fight to save Maurey from her steadiest companion:

> Yukon Jack [Maurey says] was my kind of companion. Jack never lets you down, never comes and goes to sleep just as I'm getting started. He's monogamous and predictable. A certain amount of Jack causes a certain amount of warmth. He's always there and he never calls me cunt. (9)

A risky game this. Sandlin does not pull his punches. Spunky little Maurey skirts that gender line dangerously, especially for *these* sensitive P.C. times. She carries "a little Dan Wesson model 12 .357 Magnum with a four-inch barrel and a satin blue stock" and has no compunction about waving it in between the legs of all the macho, pseudo-cowboys who harass her. "Where other people knock on wood," she says, "I rub my rod" (2). From the get-go, we realize that Maurey is bound to take a fall. The question is: How predictable will this tale of self-destruction be? How previously traveled will be her road?

When she's not drunk and waving her pistol, Maurey begs for love like a sick puppy. Witnessing her former drinking buddy coo to her boyfriend causes Maurey to wince and close her eyes. "Watching other people's affection makes me sad. . . . Hell, I could stop drinking if someone good loved me" (30).

Sandlin's use of archetypal models to invert the usual media/art lore (e.g., Rugged individualists can smoke pack after pack of cigarettes and drink gallons of liquor *but never show it*) works exceedingly well. Unfortunately, halfway through the trip, Sandlin begins to run out of gas. His three protagonists take on a motley crew of eccentric strangers, all with their own convoluted stories to tell. Having grown so deeply absorbed in Maurey, Lloyd, and Shane, I was amazed to find that Sandlin seemed to lose confidence in his narrative and felt the need to add too many other needlessly complicated (and unsatisfactorily resolved) conflicts. By the time Moby Dick is pulled over (harpooned) in Tennessee by the usual pot-bellied pig policemen and the travelers begin to lose their cache of beer, things have grown as dry as the bickering within their stale mobile loaf of bread.

Some 2,500 miles after their trip began, Maurey arrives alone in Greensboro eager to locate an AA meeting. Left behind are a crippled would-be rapist and her rescuer, Shane, who dies a zany Camille-like death. But as creaky as the narrative becomes, this is still a splendidly entertaining novel.

Watching TV with the Red Chinese takes this idea of the agitprop of addiction to its logical culmination – television, after all, may be our ultimate addiction. The plot is simple – it's an absurdist drama one might find on such pseudo-realistic shows as *Hill Street Blues* or *L.A. Law*, which is kinda sorta the point. The first-person narrator, Dexter Mitchell, a 24-year-old failed actor, tells the story of his neighbors, three Chinese students – Tzu, a witty pragmatist; Wa, a fanatical Maoist; and Chen, a young naïf enamored of all things American – who arrive in 1980 Cleveland and learn about the United States via their constant exposure to television.

Dexter watches mutely on the sidelines as his former paramour, the wicked, fickle Suzanne Betts uses Chen as a vehicle of revenge against all the men who've previously wronged her. Another of Suzanne's rejected suitors, Czapinczyk, turns his racist hatred on Chen, who thus feels obliged to follow the American media passage of rites: buy a gun and stage a tragic *High Noon*-type shootout vendetta.

The trouble here is an unnecessary subplot about an inept, egocentric filmmaker, Billy Owens, and his girlfriend, Antigone (ouch!), who make a documentary about the Chinese and their travails, to which we get the accompanying screenplay. Thus we have three layers – television, the narrator's written account, and the documentary film – to wise the ignorant reader to the fact that the media teaches a profound sense of unreality which it has the outrageous gall to pass off as reality. Whisnant pushes a kind of Rashomon for the '90s set in the '80s – this is not a bad idea – but there's a sense of neo-colonialist fervor to this view: Those Chinese, they're super-intelligent but childlike, too.

> Chen was a scientific determinist . . . he was an acolyte of the newly developed science of chaos, which perceived the mathematical beauty and logic of randomness within systems... the minute flutter of a butterfly's wings in Belgium that ends up as a snowstorm in Beijing. (133)

Cut from that to this: "They grin with glee and I feel a flash of disgust. Oh, they're like kids, my Red Chinese; they're so gullible sometimes, and the smallest things bring them pleasure" (204-05). I was hard-pressed to see beyond the narrator's good-soldier ambivalence to some overall truth beyond an old stereotype of Oriental inscrutability.

Nevertheless, Whisnant's prose is sharp and each graphed plot-point hits in its appropriately assigned spot. Connecting all this mayhem to the assassination of John Lennon is a winning concept. Yet, if Chaos Theory says that everything is interconnected, then

Luke Whisnant

Whisnant's pointing to the media as a causal agent seems a little too pat and simplistic. One might as well suggest that J.D. Salinger be dragged out of exile and put on trial for *Catcher in the Rye*'s having planted ideas in Mark David Chapman's head. And there's another dictum Whisnant forgot: character is fate. Perhaps we can accept the goofily naive Chinese and the whiny narrator, but there's little or no motivation for the mayhem caused by Suzanne Betts (save, perhaps, for the crime of gender), or the psychotically jealous Czapinczyk. What succeeds, however, is Whisnant's ultimate rationale. Image, he does convince us, has not just taken over from the concept of substance – *there is no more substance.* And I have to applaud a writer with the guts to bring in Chaos Theory, the assassination of John Lennon, *Charlie's Angels*, the flea flicker pass, and a narrator as "white as sliced white bread" (21).

Are there groups out there for the TV addicted? Well, there *should* be. All three novels pine for better, simpler days. "We grew up on that music," Suzanne Betts says after John Lennon's murder. "It was like soundtrack music for your life. It was always so real, so full of hope and possibility" (248). Better days, all three writers say, *used to be.* But filtering (or excusing) their respective emptinesses through dope, booze, and television isn't much help, either.

After I've finished my own autobiographical *Bildungsromain thang* about growing up in the '60s, what will I write about, I wonder. This 1993 mess we're all in is going to be hard to ponder; I just hope I can get as metaphorically close as these three.

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